

#TechWatch

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CENTRE FOR MEDIA

Navigating Human Rights in the Age of Technology

Takeaways from
the 'Promoting Human Rights in
the Digital Era' Project

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Navigating Human Rights in the Age of Technology: Takeaways from the 'Promoting Human Rights in the Digital Era' Project

In response to the growing influence of modern technologies on human rights, particularly for vulnerable populations, urgent attention is required. This paper builds on a [previous Czech-Norwegian project funded by Norway Funds in the Czech Republic](#), focusing on media, journalism, people with special needs, and accessibility and aims to contribute to further developments in the area.

In a democratic society, the media plays a vital role in addressing the challenges posed by the digital age. They are responsible for anticipating, analysing, and responding to human rights abuses arising from modern technology. However, a significant hindrance impairs their ability to fulfil this role effectively. Journalists currently lack sufficient education and training in understanding the impact of technology, both during their university studies and throughout their professional careers, resulting in a deficiency in essential skills. Consequently, the general public's awareness and comprehension of human rights issues associated with technology suffer as well.

1. HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

"All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated"
(United Nations Vienna Declaration, 1993)

In recent decades, human rights have garnered significant attention from various sectors, including states, multinational organizations, NGOs, and businesses. This concept, encompassing basic rights such as the right to life, liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, and the right to work and education, emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to the atrocities of World War II, formalized by the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Since then, additional international conventions and European agreements have expanded this list, integrating these rights into the Czech Republic's legal systems to safeguard fundamental human rights and freedoms..

The rapid advancement of technology and digitalization has profoundly impacted our daily lives, a process further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While these technologies offer numerous benefits, they also pose risks to human rights, especially for vulnerable groups. In democratic societies, the media plays a crucial role in addressing global challenges posed by the digital age and highlighting human rights abuses linked to modern technology. However, a lack of comprehensive training at both university and professional levels has left many journalists unprepared to tackle these issues, potentially limiting public understanding and awareness.

Given the media's pivotal role as an information source, discussion forum, and watchdog in a democracy, journalists must be acutely aware of the threats modern technologies and digitalization pose to human rights. These include privacy, freedom of expression, human dignity, non-discrimination, and the right to "analog" solutions, especially in public administration digitalization. This knowledge is essential for journalists to fulfil their responsibilities effectively.

Recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, migration crises, and the increasing criminalization of the digital world have exacerbated human rights violations, impacting rights like life and health, liberty and security, education, and public participation. These issues will be further discussed during the program.

2. THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITALIZATION ON PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

*Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.
(UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006)*

Despite being established before the digital age, international human rights conventions affirm that the same rights apply both online and offline. The goal of digitalization and modern technologies is to enhance physical and mental well-being and environmental sustainability, including protecting vulnerable individuals. However, in practice, these technologies often fall short. For example, people with disabilities may face barriers to internet access, limited technology accessibility, or a lack of necessary skills.

For journalists, the media, and educational institutions, understanding the impact of technology and digitalization on people with disabilities and the elderly is crucial. This knowledge not only helps the media fulfill their social role but also presents an opportunity to expand their audience. In the Czech Republic, over one million people live with disabilities, and by the end of 2021, 2.17 million seniors (20% of the population) were aged 65 or over.

Technology can significantly improve the quality of life for disadvantaged groups by reducing or eliminating barriers. These barriers include general accessibility, physical limitations, communication challenges, and financial obstacles. Modern technologies enable people with disabilities and seniors to live more independently, managing their lifestyles and autonomy with technological assistance in mobility, sensory perception, cognitive functions, basic needs, and social engagement.

The most common barriers they face can be divided into the following groups:

- General accessibility barriers
- Physical barriers
- Communication barriers
- Financial obstacles

Modern technologies provide people with disabilities and seniors the opportunity to fully integrate into society by enabling them to live a more independent and self-sufficient daily life. This means being able to manage one's own lifestyle and autonomy, often with the help of technology that compensates for limitations in areas such as mobility, sensory perception, cognitive functions, basic needs, and involvement in social life, including housing, work, leisure activities, and more.

Qualitative research conducted in the Czech Republic in spring 2022 as part of the Promoting Human Rights in the Digital Era project, which focused on people with disabilities, yielded interesting findings. The focus group participants with special needs provided insights into how they use technology, which technologies and devices they use to access information, and the impact of digitalization on their lives. They also identified and discussed the risks associated with digital technologies, such as targeted marketing that exploits their vulnerabilities and the impact on their privacy and safety. The participants also criticized the lack of implementation of the Czech Accessibility Law, which has resulted in significant shortcomings in the design of official websites for people with hearing and visual impairments.

3. MEDIA AND PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

“All websites should be accessible to all sections of society: there should be the function of enlarging and shrinking text. Information should be also provided using video with Czech sign language. We have had the Accessibility Act here for three years, but unfortunately state institutions are slow to implement its requirements and it takes an awfully long time to get anything done.”

(Focus Group respondent with disability, Promoting Human Rights in the Digital Era project, 2022)

As the media shapes public opinion and societal understanding, journalists must comprehend the impact of digitization and technology on vulnerable groups such as seniors and people with disabilities. Addressing this requires education and awareness-raising about modern technologies' effects on human rights, including enhancing professional standards for journalists.

Research conducted in 2022 with people with disabilities and over 600 media experts as part of the Promoting Human Rights in the Digital Era project found that over half of the media experts saw public media as primarily responsible for communication with and about people with special needs. However, their understanding of accessibility in their media channels and outputs was less clear.

The Czech transposition of EU law mandates accessibility for certain products and services for people with disabilities, including the elderly and temporarily impaired. However, implementation has been criticized, particularly by those with hearing or visual impairments and Czech Sign Language users. This presentation will outline basic accessibility requirements and resources, aiming to enhance digital services and media accessibility for people with disabilities, ensuring their equal participation in society. Additionally, having accessibility skills may increase future journalists' or media workers' job market demand.

4. SOURCES

- Project:
 - [Podpora lidských práv v digitální době: zvyšování povědomí a standardů novinářské práce v oblasti dopadu moderních technologií na lidská práva | Schválené projekty | Ministerstvo financí ČR - EHP a Norské fondy \(eeagrants.cz\)](#)
 - [Promoting Human Rights In the Digital Era – Prague Centre for Media Skills \(praguemediaskills.org\)](#)
- Videocycle with English Subtitles: <https://ddlt.iure.org/video/>
- Booklet Four Journalists: https://praguemediaskills.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/NF_5_Booklet-for-Journalists-ENG.pdf

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